

VAWQP / PES Agriculture Service Provider Research to Inform Programmatic Improvements

Informed by: Cat Buxton, Jennifer Byrne, Guy Choiniere, Caroline Gordon, Stephen Leslie, Steven Keleti, Maddie Kempner
September 20, 2022

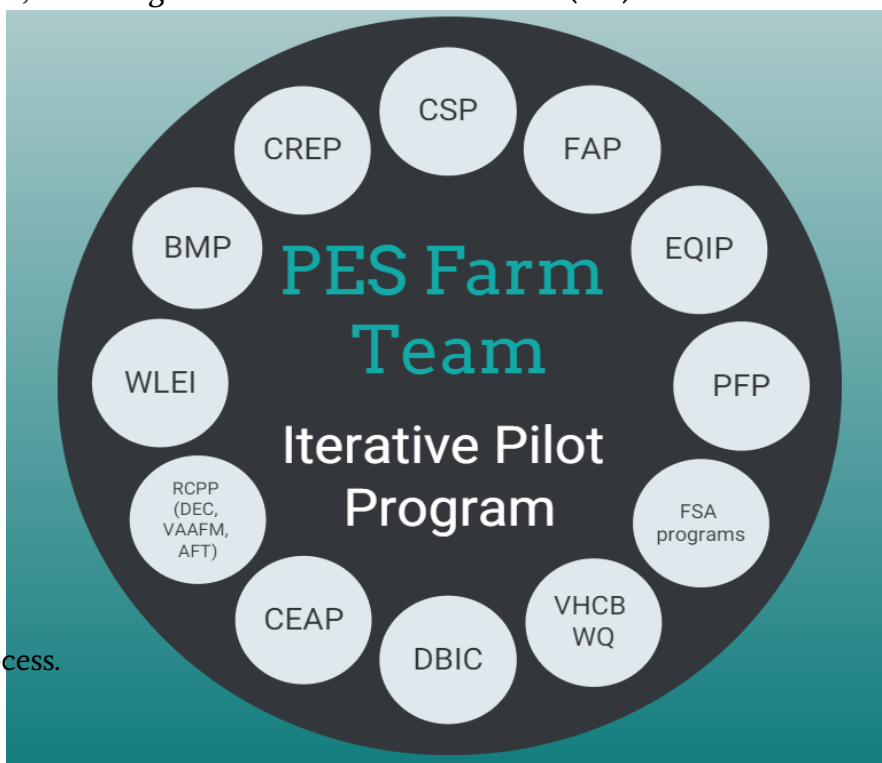
Why?

- The PES Working Group is mandated by the legislature to 1) “identify agricultural standards or practices” and 2) “**recommend existing financial incentives available to farmers that could be modified or amended to incentivize implementation.**”
- There is more opportunity to research how best to fulfill the PES WG’s stated goals to:
 - ◆ *“Identify and pay for ecosystem services that could be provided by farms of diverse types and sizes, including those currently and historically underserved by payment programs.*
 - ◆ *Be efficient with time and funding to ensure that a high return is provided to the farmer and society.”*
- There exists a vast array of state, federal, and private funding opportunities for soil health and ecosystem services in Vermont. Farmers and technical assistance providers are struggling to keep up with program requirements and application periods in their current form.
- Field level staff hold the most knowledge and insight on what programs work well, what barriers exist, and what improvements need to be made to streamline conservation delivery. There is a great need to do this deeper level analysis of programs in the state and the nation.
- The VT Agriculture Water Quality Partnership ([VAWQP](#)) has set a goal to hear from regional staff to make improvements to workflow and improve coordination.
- The 2023 Farm Bill seeks to improve USDA program efficiencies. This timely research will provide valuable information for programmatic improvements, supported by the [NACD](#).

What?

- Create a pilot program for PES in Vermont that focuses on coordinating existing programs and soliciting iterative policy improvements from field-level staff and farmers. The program will encourage farmers to sign up with a “[Farm Team](#)” to coordinate their agriculture service providers around a whole farm plan, including access to technical assistance (TA) and financial assistance (FA) planning. Farm Teams are a proven approach that has been utilized by NRCDs, VHCB, and RMA. Each PES Farm Team would serve as an opportunity to study programmatic gaps and collect iterative policy improvements informed by the experiences of farmers and field-level staff.

- Create an online portal for accessing programs which directs applicants through a streamlined application process.



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- Build Soil Health Management Plan and collect biodiversity measurements on each participating farm, showing changes over time due to coordinated conservation efforts. Measurements would include below ground tests for microbial and mycorrhizal counts, as well as above ground counts, such as forage identification conducted alongside the farmer, supporting knowledge transfer.
- Conduct a gap analysis of existing programs and services via a series of focus groups, interviews, and [Delphi surveys](#) of agricultural technical field staff to iteratively inform and improve program policies. Model focus group questions after the [VAWQP Regional Meeting hosted by White River NRCD](#):
 - Tools for Coordination: Local Work Groups, Partner Database, Tactical Basin Plans, Conservation Action Plans
 - What are the biggest hurdles you face in administering or accessing conservation programs? What bottlenecks exist in your work in conservation delivery?
 - Where do private, state, and federal programs work well together? Where do they clash or overlap? Where are there gaps in funding?
- **Special Focus:** CREP Case Study (example of federal/state/District partnership)
 - What works well, what doesn't
 - How can other programs take the positive components of this partnership

Who?

All VAWQP Partners

NRCS: Soil Conservationists, Engineers, Technicians, Foresters, Program Assistants

Topics: EQIP, CSP, CREP, AMA, EWP, ACEP

FSA: County-level employees

Topics: Disaster Assistance Programs, ARC, PLC, CREP, MPP

NRCDs: District Managers and agricultural staff

Topics: State and Federal Programs, CREP

UVM: TA Providers i.e. agronomists, grazing specialists

VAAFM: RCPP, CREP, FAP, BMP, CEAP, WLEI, DBIC

DEC: RCPP, CWI

VHCB: WQ Grants, Viability Programs

USFW: ?

LCBP: ?

Other VT Agriculture Service Partners such as:

Farmers Alliances

NOFA-VT

Intervale Center

Center for an Agricultural Economy

Additional [VHCB Farm & Forest Viability Program Advisers](#)